

Back Again, Back Again: It's Starting, It's Starting

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode twenty: It's Starting, It's Starting.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Callia insisted that Leander learn how to fight. They did not want to train alone, and Callia, having spent her whole life with a sword in her hands, was still better than me by a multitude of miles, so I tagged along.

Callia's hair was pulled back and up, one of the little braids by her ear trying to make a hasty escape from out of her ponytail. She tossed practice swords - some of the few wooden ones they had, I knew - our way. She didn't smile, but she wasn't standing in the way she used to around me - back ramrod straight, hands already halfway to fists. Instead, her shoulders were loose. She leaned in, just a bit.

We shouldn't waste time, Callia said by way of a hello. And then we began.

She did not waste as much time on drills as Cassian and his soldiers always had. There, we'd spent forty-five minutes just running and doing stretches, and then it was another hour and a half - at least - of drills, which were the longsword equivalent of shadow-boxing someone standing across from you. For me, lots of that had been catch-up, cutting circles through the air as Cassian tried in vain to get me to keep my wrists straight every time I angled my blade even a little bit. It took me ages to figure out how to put even an ounce of force into any swing happening on my left side. I hadn't had the stamina of a bunch of professional soldiers and I certainly hadn't had the shoulder strength.

Callia, at least, understood that we were not all professional soldiers. She didn't waste time on running - by god, we all did enough of that anyways - or drills against the air. There was no introductory walk-through of different guards and opening stances.

You won't learn anything without a target in front of you, she said. *And people are the only targets that really matter.* *Whether or not we wished it different. So - IlyaaS, step in front of Leander. Leander, please, lift your sword.*

Leander, who'd been looking like they'd wanted to drop even their practice weapon, hesitantly lifted their sword. Callia evaluated them, eyes flicking up and down, before going around and adjusting their posture and feet and the way they held their blade.

I do not know that I would like – they began, but Callia brought her blade up sharply to smack Leander's. They startled.

It does not matter if you do not want to pick up a sword, Leander. *They will kill you with one all the same.*

I made a sympathetic face and shifted into my own fighting stance, raising up my blade and centering my weight. Callia, without hesitating a second, turned and whirled on me, too.

And you, IlyaaS. You still move like your prometide when you fight. There was less of a bite to the word, now. It was less an accusation, more a statement of fact. *As long as you act like him – even if it is just in battle – everyone will still look to you and think tyrannus.*

I adjusted my stance, just a little, to match closer to the way she stood – and tried not to make a face at the way it grated against what had been ingrained into me. I flashed a grin. *You mean Haast? I bet I could beat her.*

This time, Callia smacked her sword hard against mine, no hesitation, no holding back. I yelped as the shock ran up my arms and I dropped the blade, shaking out my hands. I didn't

have gloves here, to take away any of the sting. It wasn't something I'd been provided and I saw them too sporadically to think that asking would be anything other than selfish. *And you think that ingratiates you to them?*

I hadn't known that word - what I, here, translate as *ingratiates*. I'd gotten better and better and better about this, but there were still moments. Many moments. Especially when Callia wanted to find a way to cut me back down to size. *What? That long word.*

Makes them like you, Leander supplied.

I hadn't quite understood. *But they don't.*

Callia sucked in a long-suffering breath. *That is my point, eligidida.*

No one likes a show-off, Leander hummed, and Callia rolled her eyes.

Says the poet.

Says the poet to a someday-prince, Leander shot back. They flashed a smile, wide and winning and golden, and Callia rolled her eyes - this time, without any of the vitriol.

Fondly, to Leander, she said - *Raise your sword again. I will not ever be a prince if I can help it.*

How about king? They laughed.

Quit that. I will be a leader. If anything. I still do not know that I quite believe that end of your prophecy. Now - stop trying to talk your way out. Raise your sword.

So we did - she walked Leander through basics, never going more than a minute without having them strike out at me or helping them fix their grip. They hesitated too long before moving and curbed their attacks, not wanting to put any force behind their swings, and worry twisted at their face when I moved to catch their blade and a deep *thunk* resounded through the clearing as their blade caught against my crossguard.

That wasn't even hard, I tried to reassure them, stumbling over the words in my haste. That's good. That's good.

Callia had been right, of course, about the way I moved. But it was hard to unlearn and even harder to change - find my own way to act, separate from Cassian, separate from the soldiers I'd known - when I could tell how much better their drills worked than the one Callia introduced. We'd spent so long honing our abilities, there, and even though I could understand why she was *right* - simply forcing yourself to *strike* and *strike* and *strike* makes more sense to someone picking up a sword for the first time than telling them to *parry* -- there was utility in understanding the mechanics behind what I was doing that Callia didn't know how to explain.

Cassain had been good at the mechanics. That was something I'd always glossed over. He'd been so insistent that I wouldn't be a useless soldier.

I shoved those thoughts away. I prodded, a little bit, and curbed my words to offer suggestions - *I have found this is easier. If it is not the same for you, you do not have to move as I do.* I tried to make it clear - *I am not his. Not anymore. I want to love you like I loved him. But we can change the things he gave to me and make them our own. He does not have to have the only and final hold on everything he's ever touched. There could be - strength. In taking what they have used against us and turning it back on them.*

This was still difficult ground to tread. But we got through it, Callia and I both keeping our tempers in check and doing our best to actually listen to the words coming out of the others' mouth, regardless of the tone - intentional or accidental. Eventually, tired, shoulders shaking from when Callia had finally taken Leanders' sword so we could expend every bit of nervous energy we had on each other (to Leander's great relief, them backing off to sit along the side and sprawl out their legs and watch as we went at it), conversation turned, as it had lately when it was just the three of us - well. *If we do want to beat them, the kings, the laerds. Is that the only option? Or - can we get them on our side?*

If we do want to remake this world, do we have to beat the laerds, too? Or can we get them on our side?

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more. If you'd like to hear more about the show, visit us on Twitter, Instagram, or Tumblr @backagainpodcast or on Tik Tok @abigailelizawrites. Our outro music is Nightingales by Pierce Murphy from the album To Japan, and is licensed under an Attribution License. The song was retrieved from FreeMusicArchive.org. Visit the description of this episode for full copyright information and a link to the page. Sound effect attribution, similarly, can be found in the episode description.

If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that you do not have to fill your days with action and creation to be worthy of the space you take up. You were made already whole.

The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.